

“What a Friend”

**by Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen
The Congregational Church of Hollis
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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Mark 7:24-37

Prayer:

God, grant us wisdom and grace as we strive to understand and respond to the challenges presented to us in Scripture. May my words, and our collective responses to your eternal Word, be in keeping with your desire for human thriving. Amen.

Some people are deeply disturbed by what Mark wrote in the first part of this morning’s gospel text. Did Jesus Christ—the Son of God—actually spout a racial slur?

But there it is, in black and white: when the Syrophenician woman begs for his help to heal her daughter, Mark reports that Jesus’ first words to her were: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” What are we supposed to make of this?

Well, like everything in the Bible, it’s imperative that we pay attention to the broader context. So, having zoomed in on Jesus’ response, let’s back the perspective out a bit and view what else was going on, while also remembering the fundamental Christian teaching that Jesus was fully divine *and* fully human.

Mark’s gospel, in particular, emphasizes the down-to-earth *humanity* of Jesus. Mark’s Jesus is not some surreal, ethereal man who somehow managed to live above the influence of his culture and upbringing. He obviously discovered things about himself and about the often-subtle ways that community shapes us—and sometimes even puts us in conflict with our deeper convictions.

Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, and that meant that he had imbibed the cultural understanding of Jewish superiority over other races and cultures. The social and political dynamics between the people of Israel and the people of Tyre—which was predominantly Gentile—was . . . well, strained. Maybe that’s being too nice. The truth is that they couldn’t stand each other, and basically didn’t interact if they didn’t have to. Which is probably why Jesus thought that the region of Tyre might a good place to escape to for some peace and quiet after he’d had a rough time with the Jewish leaders.

In the scene immediately preceding our reading this morning, Jesus had been arguing with some Pharisees—Jewish religious leaders—about how legalistic they were being with regard to his disciples’ lack of attention to Jewish dietary laws. Jesus’ rebuttal to

their criticism was: “[T]here is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” (Mark 7:15-16)

So, it’s more than a little bit shocking for the first words out of Jesus’ mouth to the woman begging for his help to be so harsh and dismissive. But there it was. Jesus’ Jewish prejudice was out there for all the world to see.

According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus “didn’t answer her at all” until his disciples came and urged him to send her away because she kept shouting after them.¹ We can say this much, at least: Mark’s Jesus was being progressive in responding to her in the first place—after all, not only was she a Syrophenician Gentile, she was a woman; she was very low on the respectability scale.

Nonetheless, his human prejudice was jarring. There is so much assumed political understanding packed into that 1st-century refutation that we in our 21st-century American understanding just don’t get. But one biblical scholar has speculated that it had to do with the Syrophenicians—who controlled a key port—withholding food to the Israelites at key times of famine or drought. This, in turn, made the Jewish people a bit edgy when it came to issues of provision. That’s why Jesus’ comment about throwing the food to the dogs would have had a double entendre, which is always helpful for dramatic effect.²

In any case, Jesus’ human prejudice was met with the power of divine love and fearlessness in the form of that woman, as she insisted that even the dogs gratefully received the children’s crumbs. We believe in a God of love and surprises, and this was indeed a surprising response! As she reached out with love for her daughter and with confidence in what she had heard about this healer from Nazareth, the Syrophenician woman’s bold but non-defensive rejoinder serves to remind us that, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. . .”³

Both the woman and Jesus were changed in that moment. Jesus recognised the divine truth in the woman’s words and in her brazen act of faith. A very human Jesus saw that he had not yet expressed as much love or power as she had, nor had his deeper convictions and divine understanding been borne out by his actions in his first response. His transformed and transformational response was one of mutuality, of equal respect and dignity exchanged between two people; he treated her not as a social inferior, or suspect, or enemy, in spite of what he’d been taught by the culture around him. He treated her as an equal, as a friend.

He could simply have walked away. From a social or cultural point of view, that probably would not have disturbed his disciples, and we would never know anything about it today. It’s the fact that he *didn’t* just walk away that made the story so remarkable. Rather than responding as one might have in his situation—especially as a man who would

¹ Matt.15: 23-24.

² New Interpreter’s Bible, Mark, p. 611.

³ 1 John 4:18.

have been viewed as having been rebuked by one beneath him—Jesus surprises us with a still more excellent way, recognizing both his temporary short-sightedness and her clearer view of the big picture in that moment, and responding with a generous grace. Many of us may have lessons to learn from this shared moment between Jesus and the woman.

From Tyre, Jesus moved back to a more familiar region, towards the Sea of Galilee. And there again, Mark says, he was approached to heal another's hardship. This time, it was a group of people who brought to him a deaf man with a speech impediment. This time, Jesus' response of compassion and friendship was immediate. Rather than create a spectacle by healing the man in front of everybody, Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd.

He afforded the afflicted man the dignity of removing him to a secluded setting before laying healing hands on him. After all, Mark tells us, Jesus was sticking his fingers into the guy's ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. If a whole crowd had witnessed those things, can you just imagine the gossip imitations and the memes that would have resulted?

Some of you have probably seen the viral videos of people who were born deaf but who, thanks to advanced medical technology, have been given the gift of hearing. Aren't they powerful? But what strikes me about the videos I've watched is that what's transpiring is an incredibly vulnerable moment for those individuals; hearing loved one's voices for the first time—and also, sometimes, hearing their own voice. I can imagine how that might well be a very frightening and overwhelming moment. Jesus' sensitivity in allowing a man he'd never met before to hear and speak for the first time in a private place, without the glare of cameras or gawkers, was an act of true dignity and friendship.

As Christians, as people choosing to pattern our lives after the example of Jesus Christ, how are we demonstrating friendship to strangers—especially to the vulnerable and the marginalized?

I imagine that many of you are as troubled as I have been by the reports and images of the refugee crisis that's been unfolding and intensifying in Europe from the Middle East recently, and has been especially present on social media these past couple of weeks. I find it curiously timely that our lectionary Gospel text this week makes reference to Syrophenician people as dogs—as something less than human. Because that seems to be the way that some people are referring to the traumatized migrants from Syria (the same region, some two millennia later!), perilously trying to escape the atrocities besieging them in their homeland.

Closer to home, we have similar issues on our southern border. The circumstances surrounding many of the thousands of people attempting to gain entry to the United States each year are different, but as we periodically hear, many of the unauthorized immigrants feel equally desperate to make a better life for themselves and for their children. They, too, undertake treacherous journeys, risking their lives (and those of their children) for the sake of a better existence on the other side.

In both cases, by their own accounts, the experience of most of these desperate human beings is mortifying, humiliating, even dehumanizing.

As some European countries turn massive numbers of these refugees away, expecting people with no resources to speak of to find a way to survive on their own; and as growing numbers of American voices seem to feel justified in dismissing the genuine suffering of fellow human beings because the financial and social cost to us seems to be more than we're willing to sacrifice, it's imperative for the Church to be asking, "What are we called to do? How would Jesus respond to this?"

The answers aren't easy, of course. But I am convinced that it starts with a mentality that greets even those who pose a potential drain on the social or economic system not as threats or burdens, but as *friends*. Because, let's face it: it's almost always about how much it's going to cost to take care of vulnerable people that turns people off. That, and a fearful feeling that those with different customs and cultural norms will over-run and do away with our own.

However, apart from the one brief moment that he learned from in our lesson today, Jesus never, ever allowed the cost—whether financial or personal—to determine his course of action.

The concern over the plight of the needy being a burden not worth bearing, or at least as being more than we can cope with, has been an issue since time began. As our Old Testament lesson makes clear, human beings—even people of faith—have always managed to treat the poor, in particular, with disdain, preferring the company of the moneyed sort; refusing to share; and even taking what little the poor have from them. Just read the book of Job to see how even people who know differently can find ways to blame the poor for their plight.

But Proverbs 22 doesn't mince words. Listen again: "A sterling reputation is better than striking it rich" it says; "a gracious spirit is better than money in the bank. The rich and the poor shake hands as equals—God made them both! ... Don't walk on the poor just because they're poor, and don't use your position to crush the weak, because God will come to their defense; the life you took, he'll take from you and give back to them."⁴

Friends, as followers of Jesus Christ, you and I are called to behave differently from the rest of the world. It's rarely a call to an easier life, but it's always a call to a richer, more meaningful, and lasting life. It's a call to care for the world God loves every miserable and beautiful bit of; and, despite what society might suggest to us about them, ours is a call to embrace even needy strangers as friends.

May God help us learn how to live out that calling with hope, determination, and joy. Amen.

⁴ vs. 1-2, 22-23, *The Message*